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The application of a qualitative approach to adult attachment research: A short report

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Attachment theory provides a framework for understanding how individuals form close relationships, first as children and later as adults. A central concept is that of 'internal working models' (Bowlby, 1988), which reflects a child's internalisation of a relationship with an attachment figure. Through her research, Mary Ainsworth developed this notion and distinguished three attachment styles which reflect differences in mental representations. If the child's relationship with the attachment figure is characterised by consistent support and comfort in times of distress, it may result in the development of a secure attachment style. Those children whose attachment figure responded inconsistently or insensitively may develop an anxious-ambivalent attachment style. Those children whose attachment figure was consistently unresponsive may develop an anxious-avoidant attachment style (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall, 1978). These attachment styles are thought to affect the formation and maintenance of close relationships for the rest of the individual's life (Bowlby, 1973; 1988). However, internal working models are also dynamic and provisional: if an attachment figure persistently behaves in ways that do not match expectations, the internal working model has to be revised. They remain open to change during the lifespan, particularly in the context of close relationships (Howe, 2011). Typically, a partner or a close friend serves as an attachment figure in adulthood, with secure adult relationships characterised by the capacity to relate to others in a mutual and reciprocal manner. Insecurely attached adults may be anxious-ambivalent, with this attachment style characterised by a focus on negative emotions and a need for more support than others are able or willing to provide. Insecurely attached adults may also be anxious-avoidant, with this

attachment style characterised by the suppression of attachment-related thoughts and the use of coping strategies that involve distancing rather than seeking support (Howe, 2011).

Adult attachment research tends to be investigated within two distinct methodological traditions. One tradition, mostly represented in social and personality psychology, is based on self-reports that assess adult perceptions of relationships, mainly romantic relationships. Adults are asked to rate their level of agreement with statements that describe differing relational styles which purportedly correspond with attachment styles (Hesse, 2008), such as the Relationship Questionnaire (RQ; Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991). The other tradition, mostly represented in developmental psychology, is based on standardised semi-structured interviews with a classification coding system based on numerical ratings – the most popular being the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George, Kaplan, and Main, 1985). The AAI explores an adult's mental representation of attachment by eliciting descriptions of childhood relationships. Based on ratings, each interview is assigned to a specific classification (Hesse, 2008).

These methods of exploring adult attachment belong to a generally positivist and reductionist approach. However, social constructionism places emphasis on context and interpersonal processes, where meanings are seen as co-constructed and identity is seen to be fluid and shifting. Beliefs, schemas and attitudes are seen to be connected to particular contexts and relationships rather than intrinsic to an individual (Dallos, 2006). This view of identity is consistent with an attachment perspective that considers internal working models to be created in relation to different relationships.

The use of qualitative methods to explore adult attachment facilitates a deeper and more accurate understanding of an individual's experiences, by giving context to identified attachment behaviours, taking into account both conscious and unconscious processes. Further, it does not reduce an individual and the complex variations in their life experiences into a basic category.

Changes in attachment styles are likely to occur when individuals face life events that expose them to new information that contradict the core assumptions of their internal working models (Bowlby, 1973). Attachment theory has been applied to explore the transition to parenthood, but mainly in an attempt to predict particular changes to

attachment styles rather than exploring how these changes may occur. Moreover, most of the literature focuses on the transition to first-time parenthood, with a significant shortfall of research focusing on when individuals become parents to more than one child. However, the few studies that have focused on the transition to second-time parenthood have found differences from the transition to first-time parenthood (e.g., Frost, 2006), highlighting the need for further research in this area.

Therefore, my doctoral work-in-progress research aims to explore the nuances and changes in attachment behaviours in different relationships across the transition to second-time parenthood. I have recruited one heterosexual couple for this longitudinal and prospective case study. Data collection consists of several phases that follow the couple from when they are expecting their second child through to when the second child is one year of age. Relationships and life consist of multiple layers, dimensions and perspectives; therefore, this study uses a qualitative mixed methods approach as this generates multidimensional material (Gabb, 2009). Multiple methods of data collection are used, where each partner of the couple is interviewed both separately and together. In the pregnancy phase of the research, the separate interviews consist of a biographical interview to elicit their attachment histories. This is followed by a semi-structured interview, with questions designed to prompt information about their current adult attachment behaviours and close relationships. Participants also keep individual diaries which allow them to represent themselves and their everyday life in yet another manner. The joint method consists of a photo-elicitation interview whereby the couple take 4–6 photos that represent ‘a day in their life together’. These photos are then discussed in an unstructured interview, generating additional insights.

The subsequent phases of data collection repeat these methods with the exception of the biographical interview. The data is analysed using a qualitative mixed methods approach, namely qualitative pluralism, which combines throughout both analysis and interpretation in order to gain a more holistic insight. This approach provides multidimensional perspectives into understanding a person’s experiences (Frost, 2011).

Presently, the ongoing analysis of the first phase of the research from the mother/female participant of the couple has yielded some preliminary findings. Thus far, I have applied a

psychosocial analysis called Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) to the biographical interview, which considers how a participant's inner world (e.g., a person's psychological self) has changed in relation to their outer world (e.g., life events) and vice versa (Wengraf, 2001). I have also completed a structural narrative analysis on the semi-structured interview as its purpose is to explore how people make sense of events within their lives, and to investigate the manner in which these stories are told (Riessman, 2008). I will subsequently carry out an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) on the same semi-structured interview to further explore personal lived experiences and their subjective meanings (Shinebourne, 2011). The structural narrative analysis and IPA will also be applied to the unstructured photo-elicitation interview.

I now present a very brief snapshot of the preliminary findings of each method used so far. Before doing so, I introduce my participant: at the time of the interview, Claire is 26 years old and is 5 months pregnant with her second child. Originally born in America, and having lived most of her life there, she now lives in the UK with her husband Jack and their first-born child Shane, who is 3-years old. When Claire was born, she was the sixth child, and lived with her siblings, mother, father and paternal grandmother. All names have been replaced with pseudonyms in order to protect individual's identities.

Commencing with the psychosocial analysis (BNIM); in terms of Claire's very early relationships with her mother, father and grandmother, each relationship is characterised by different qualities. At the time, Claire experienced both her mother and father to be consistently unavailable during times of need, unloving and rejecting. Claire's attachment strategy with her mother and father at that particular time was to over-regulate her affect by suppressing her needs as they would go, and remain, unmet. Nevertheless, Claire experienced her grandmother as consistently available, loving and supportive during times of need. Claire's attachment strategy at that particular time with her grandmother was to ask for protection and comfort with ease, secure in the knowledge that she would receive it. During the course of her life, Claire seems to have used different attachment strategies in different relationships, and in different situations. These findings highlight the multifaceted variation of relational experiences, both within relationships and across relationships. With regards to the analysis of her present sense of self, it seems as though Claire has a current sense of security, and at times, her sense of self and of others are increasingly enacted in

secure attachment behaviours such as having a sense of reflection, autonomy, and seeking help when needed. However, at other times, it seems as though she has a sense of self and of others that is more in line with avoidant attachment behaviours, such as downplaying the importance of relationships. Here, behaviour and talk is directed away from anything that may threaten or distress her emotionally. Again, this analysis illustrates the complex variation of Claire's sense of self and of others.

Although BNIM's method facilitates an understanding of an individual's past situated states and present sense of subjectivity, this is just one way in which to look at the phenomenon under investigation. I subsequently applied a narrative analysis to the semi-structured interview designed to elicit information on current attachment behaviours and close adult relationships. One of the key findings is that Claire considers she currently has several close adult relationships she turns to for support during times of need. This analysis revealed that the characteristics of each close relationship she has are different, and they each fulfil different functions in terms of closeness and support. Further, when she experiences difficulties or feelings of stress or distress, Claire perceives that she turns to close others, such as her husband Jack or her friends, for support in coping with this. However, when Claire is by herself and experiencing a difficult situation, she becomes completely self-sufficient and operates in an extremely efficient manner. At this point, Claire relies on herself to get her through the difficult experience and there is no margin for error as she has no one to fall back on. Nevertheless, Claire actively seeks support from Jack during these types of circumstances, indicating that she can both cope with difficult situations by herself, and can also seek support from others when they are available, signifying a balance between autonomy and dependency. It seems that Claire engages in a range of coping strategies, which appear to be dependent on the particular context of each situation, illuminating the complex variation of her relational experiences.

Whilst the BNIM findings offers insight into Claire's past relationships and how they were experienced at the time, as well as an understanding of her current situated subjectivity, the narrative analysis provides an additional perspective with regards to how Claire (re)constructs her sense of self as an individual and how she (re)constructs her sense of relationships. This provides further understanding of her current attachment behaviours in terms of her sense of self and sense of others.

In addition to the narrative analysis, the next step is to also apply IPA to the same semi-structured interview. This provides an additional layer of insight by exploring, in detail, the meaning of Claire's personal lived experiences of her relationships. Combining both the multiple analyses and interpretations will paint a multi-layered and more holistic picture of my participant, which will highlight the nuances and complexity of attachment behaviours enacted in different relationships and in different contexts. This process will subsequently be repeated with Claire's husband's data, followed by the application of narrative analysis and IPA to the joint photo-elicitation interview to see how they jointly construct their sense of selves and relationships as well as to explore in detail their joint personal lived experiences. The phases of the research following the birth of the second child will also repeat this process, with the exception of the biographical interview and BNIM.

My doctoral study aims to extend the limits of research into attachment theory by using qualitative mixed methods to further the understanding of adult attachment. This study is designed to be innovative in its methods, and as a result, pioneering in its findings.

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